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Paul Gauguin and Edgar Allan Poe's "Philosophy of Composition"

On August 14, 1888, Gauguin wrote to Émile Schuffenecker, "Un conseil, ne peignez pas trop d'après nature. L'art est une abstraction..."¹ Abstraction in art meant the primacy of pictorial logic over natural representation, of the subjective vision of the artist over objective imitation of nature. Inspired by a continuous exchange of views in his correspondence with Vincent Van Gogh, Gauguin began a close study of the Japanese print in June 1888; like Vincent, he found in these prints a precedent and certain specific clues for the development of a new style. The new mode of painting, first attempted in *Jeunes lutteurs* (Wildenstein #273)², was brought to an early climax with the aid of Émile Bernard in the *Vision after the sermon* (Wildenstein #245), in September 1888. The rapid evolution of Gauguin's painting style continued after his move to Arles, on October 22, intensified by the constant theoretical argumentation with Vincent Van Gogh.

The central issue of these discussions was, as is well-known, "abstraction" and its corollary, "working from memory". Even before these discussions were seriously under way, Gauguin wrote a letter to Émile Bernard, who was still in Pont-Aven, expressing another aspect of the doctrine of abstraction in art. For Gauguin, the subordination of representation to presentation in painting was, above all, a doctrine of artistic freedom.

"Vous discutez avec Laval sur les ombres et me demandez si je m'en fous. En tant que quant à l'explication de la lumière, oui. Examinez les Japonais qui dessinent pourtant admirablement et vous verrez la vie en plein air et au soleil sans ombres. Ne se servant de la couleur que comme une combinaison des tons, harmonies diverses, donnant l'impression de chaleur, etc... En outre je considère l'impressionnisme comme une recherche tout à fait nouvelle, s'éloignant forcément de tout ce qui est mécanique tel que la photographie, etc... de là je m'éloignerai autant que possible de ce qui donne l'illusion d'une chose et l'ombre étant le *trompe l'œil* du soleil, je suis porté à la supprimer."

So far Gauguin's rejection of the shadow is based on opposition to illusionism in painting; both this opposition and the citation of Japanese print as an example were hardly unknown views to Bernard. But Gauguin, despite his characteristic dogmatic tone, introduced a very interesting concept in the following sentences.

"Si dans votre composition l'ombre y entre comme une forme nécessaire c'est tout autre chose. Ainsi au lieu d'une figure vous mettez l'ombre seulement d'un personnage; c'est un point de départ original dont vous avez calculé l'étrangeté. Tel le corbeau sur la tête de Pallas qui vient là plutôt qu'un perroquet par suite du choix de l'artiste; choix calculé. Ainsi donc, mon cher Bernard, mettez les ombres si vous jugez utile, n'en mettez pas c'est toujours la même chose si vous vous considérez non l'esclave de l'ombre. C'est en quelque sorte elle qui est à votre service."³

1. Paul GAUGUIN, *Lettres de Gauguin à sa femme et à ses amis*, éd. Maurice Malingue, Paris, Grasset, 1946, p. 134.

2. I am using Gauguin's own title for the painting, from the catalogue of the Café Volpini exhibition, 1889 (#40).

3. Paul GAUGUIN, *op. cit.*, p. 150 (ca. Oct. 30-31, 1888).

Artistic freedom is a result of the intervention of the artist's calculated choice in the creative process.

In emphasizing the freedom of the creative artist *vis-à-vis* nature and the calculated, rational aspect of the creative process, Gauguin used the example of Poe's *Raven*. He was echoing Poe's own explanation of the composition of the poem given in "The Philosophy of Composition".

"The next desideratum was a pretext for the continuous use of the one word 'Nevermore'... the difficulty lay in the reconciliation of this monotony with the exercise of reason on the part of the creature repeating the word. Here, then, immediately arose the idea of a *non*-reasoning creature capable of speech; and, very naturally, a parrot, in the first instance suggested itself, but was superseded forthwith by a Raven as equally capable of speech, and infinitely more in keeping with the intended tone."⁴

Since Gauguin mentioned the parrot as a rejected alternative, almost in passing, both he and Bernard must have been familiar with the essay, presumably through Baudelaire's translation.⁵ It must have

4. Edgar ALLAN POE, "The Philosophy of Composition", *The Works of E.A. Poe, Literary Criticism*, volume I, New York, 1927, pp. 38-9.

5. Edgar POE, "La Genèse d'un Poème", (traduction par Charles Baudelaire), *La Revue française*, 20 avril, 1859; reprinted in *Histoires Grottesques et Sérieuses*, Paris, Michel Lévy, 1865. Gauguin again mentioned Poe late in 1888, in a letter to Émile Schuffenecker (December 1888): Roger Marx, "Lettres inédites de Vincent Van Gogh et de Paul Gauguin", *Europa*, February 15, 1939; quoted in John Rewald, *Post-Impressionism*, New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1961, p. 265. In 1893, in the *Cahier pour Aline*, ms., Paris, Bibliothèque d'Art et Archéologie, Fondation Jacques Doucet (facsimile, ed. S. Damiron, 1963), pp. 13-16, Gau-

been Émile Bernard who brought the Baudelaire volume with him to Brittany and who introduced Gauguin to the essay in August-September 1888.

Gauguin alluded to the *Raven* as a literary parallel in order to emphasize the artist's choice and his calculation of effects on the basis of pictorial appropriateness and probability. But, he was also surely attracted to the *Raven* in connection with the discussion of shadows because the Manet illustration of the passage, "And my soul from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor/ Shall be lifted — nevermore!" came to mind; here the shadow was used with calculated "strangeness". Gauguin may have been familiar with the Manet illustrations which were published in 1875 and again in 1888 and 1889.⁶ He himself had, of course, used shadows in a very calculated and strange way to produce a most powerfully expectant and sinister mood in *Bretonnes et veau* (Wildenstein #252).

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guguin constructed his own tongue-in-cheek "Genèse d'un tableau" on the basis of Poe's essay.

6. Edgar POE, *Le Corbeau. The Raven. Poème*, traduction française de Stéphane Mallarmé, avec illustrations par E. Manet, Paris, Richard Lesclide, 1875; *Les Poèmes d'Edgar Poë*, traduction de Stéphane Mallarmé, avec portrait et fleuron par Manet, Bruxelles, Deman, 1888; and *Les Poèmes d'Edgar Poë*, traduction de Stéphane Mallarmé, avec dessins inédits de Manet, Paris, Vanier, 1889. The 1888 edition appeared in July and was reviewed in all the literary journals of the avant-garde.